

For Your Information

Courtesy Of:

Cotati Large Animal Hospital

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Pigeon Fever

Pigeon fever is a disease with high prevalence in the south western United States where it is primarily seen in the summer and fall months. Despite the name, it has absolutely nothing to do with pigeons other than the fact that affected horses develop a swollen "pigeon breast" due to abscess formation in the chest area. Pigeon fever is caused by the bacteria *Corynebacterium pseudotuberculosis* which can survive in the soil for more than 8 months. It is believed that the bacteria is transmitted from one horse to another by biting flies feeding on the exudate from draining abscesses or by contamination of superficial skin wounds by soil containing the bacteria.

Although pigeon fever abscesses can occur anywhere, the most common locations are the chest and ventral abdomen, or the sheath/udder (inguinal) region. These infections are often noticed first as a generalized swelling along the belly or on one side of the chest. The swelling progresses to reveal a smaller, more discrete, and very firm swelling which is the abscess itself. These swellings can be quite painful and cause signs of lameness and stiffness if they are near a leg. About 25% of horses will also develop fever and may go off feed.

Treatment

Once they come to a head, abscesses must eventually be opened and drained to the outside. It may take from one to several weeks before an abscess matures enough to be drained. Hot water compresses applied for 10-15 minutes twice daily and application of Numotizine or Icthammol ointment can hasten the maturation process. Anti-inflammatory drugs such as Phenylbutazone (Bute) can be given to relieve pain and swelling as necessary. Antibiotics will delay the maturation process and are usually not given to horses with pigeon fever. As it matures, the abscess will develop a soft area at the center, the skin in the area will develop a bruised appearance, and the hair will fall out. The abscess may then rupture spontaneously or be opened with a surgical blade. One open and draining, the abscess should be flushed out one to two times daily with dilute betadine. Extra care should be taken to collect and dispose of all of the puss and used flush which contains the highest level of bacteria to limit its spread. If good drainage has been established, the abscess will usually heal within two weeks without complications. The spread of pigeon fever abscesses to internal organs is a serious complication that occurs in about 8% of cases and requires long term antibiotic therapy.

Prevention & Control

Steps you can take to reduce the occurrence and spread of pigeon fever:

1. Fly control such as manure disposal and topical fly pour-ons
2. Containing the abscess material though having the abscess opened rather than letting it open on its own
3. Isolate the affected horses especially once the abscess it close to opening

4. Disinfect the stall or area where the affected horse was with dilute bleach after the horse returns to its normal area